

Called and Sent, A Charism of Service: School Sisters of Notre Dame
History of the St. Louis Province
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Interprovincial Ministry to the Cherokee (1983-1988)
Tahlequah, Oklahoma

The call to become a part of the Oklahoma Cherokee ministry originated with the interprovincial leadership of the congregation. The sisters who responded to the provincial council's request for volunteers would be moving into a challenging assignment. Though defined for the sisters by the committee selected from the council, the ministry would be a part of the local and diocesan church in Oklahoma and the Cherokee Nation as it functioned in that state.¹

Each province selected three sisters from those who answered the initial call for volunteers. From the group of fifteen sisters Phyllis Bradtke, Chicago; Mary Daniel Curtin, Milwaukee; Annette Fernholtz, Mankato; Beth McGlynn, Wilton; Linda Ross, Dallas; and Joyce Engle, St. Louis,

After two years of meeting and dialogue, the provincial leadership made the final selection, and the project was launched officially in August 1983. During July the six sisters attended the National Indian Symposium as guests of the Cherokee Nation. They signed contracts with the Nation and the diocese. The formalities of finance, health and insurance were settled with a representative of the provincials who were to share expenses for the venture.

Sister Joyce Engle had transferred to the project from her work with the poor and disenfranchised people in Cairo, Illinois. Her experience being with them prepared her, to a great extent, for a compassionate and culturally sensitiveness approach to the Cherokee People. Similarly, each of the sisters brought to the project their special gifts and particular skills.

Their enthusiasm and eagerness to succeed in a totally new field of ministry could not be faulted. However the challenge of bonding as a community while searching for specific direction for their ministry brought unforeseen difficulties.

It took some time to connect with various groups in the vast territory. An offering of social service through the church, and by non-Native American women, was a first-time event in the three counties assigned to the sisters. Eventually, the six sisters found service areas suited to their gifts, but this necessitated dividing into two groups. For the Cherokee people were clustered together, in some instances, far from other groups.

¹ There were nineteen proposals for a joint project among the provinces. The choice was narrowed to three ministries: Hispanics in Brownsville, Texas; Haitian refugees in Miami, Florida; Native Americans in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

Attitudes toward cultural differences as well as the need to take the initiative to move more freely among the people created some tension within the community. The sisters' commitment to the people superseded all else, and their genuine concern brought greater openness so that involvement with the people gradually took place over the next year.

Late in 1984 Sister Joyce became ill and left for St. Louis. In January of 1985 Sister Daniel became extremely fatigued, showing symptoms of pneumonia Sister was taken to Tulsa where a diagnosis of as rare lung disease explained her condition, but too late to be of help. Within a few days she died. Sister Daniel's body was returned to Milwaukee for burial.

There was shock and distress caused by the loss of two of the original members, but additional help arrived within a few months. Sister Mary Rothfork of the Mankato Province and Sister Joan Moorhem of the St. Louis Province arrived in July 1985.

The missionaries put their hand to a variety of works to affect both as personal and communal witness. They set up a food pantry. Help was given in a Crisis Center and a Literacy Program. Bible groups were formed, and their involvement in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults brought them into parish activities. Sister Joan taught English composition at Flaming Rainbow College. And the sisters took their turn helping on Bingo Night! As Sister Joan said, "We did many good projects and worked with many of the people, and things were improved and enhanced by our presence. But it was difficult to gain a specific focus or sense any forward movement from our efforts."

Misunderstanding of actions and motives from the outside created the greatest obstacle to the project. The difference in approach to acculturation and the hierarchical procedures for addressing this issue created an impasse. Prayer and reflection guided by Sister Rita Schonhoff, St. Louis, and advice from Walter Farrell, S.J., President of the Jesuit Conference, and Sister Joan Range, ASC, a canon lawyer, helped those involved to identify possible solutions. Though the bishop and the provincial leaders made efforts to resolve the problem, the decision was reached to withdraw.²

A recommendation was made to the Interprovincial Ministry Coordinators that the project remain possible for sisters on individual assignment, to be supported by their own province. The group in Tahlequah presented the report with the suggestion that future projects be considered in an effort at cross-cultural ministry. Though only a few years were spent in the Oklahoma territory, the sisters involved in this worthwhile experiment benefited personally from their time with the Cherokee people. Though the group was dissolved, each sister moved on to become involved in ministries that required a commitment to justice.

² The Interprovincial Ministry Project file contains forms, guidelines, communications, minutes, and letters from parties involved in the decision to withdraw from the project. St. Louis Archives.

